

U.S. Military Engagement with Mexico: Uneasy Past and Challenging Future

JSOU Report 10-2

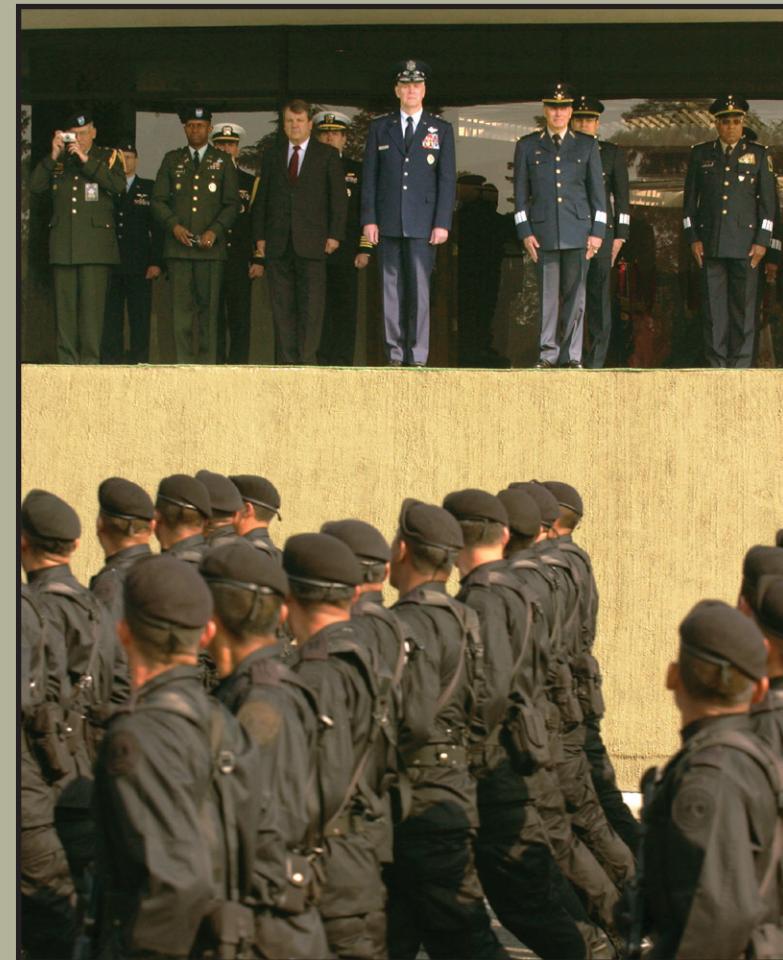
U.S. Military Engagement with Mexico

Turbiville



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Graham H. Turbiville, Jr.
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On the cover. Developing U.S. and Mexican military relationships were advanced by visits like that of U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Richard Myers (center) to Mexico City in April 2005. The Mexican host, Secretary of National Defense General Gerardo Vega and his guest watched Mexican army units as they passed in review in Mexico City. Photo by SSgt D. Myles Cullen, U.S. Air Force.



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Foreword

Despite little public notice, U.S.-Mexican military relations have changed fundamentally in recent years. This has been a consequence of mutually identified threats, outreach programs that have fostered joint understandings, and Mexican military transformation efforts that both countries judge as essential for promoting national and regional security. Mexican Special Operations Forces (SOF) in particular—as well as selected law enforcement components—have received substantial U.S. military support. U.S. SOF trainers and educators have been instrumental in supporting Mexican professional development goals, underscoring how important such skills and forces are in the current operational environment in the Southwest border areas and beyond.

In this regard, the struggle between Mexican authorities and narcoguerillas is having an ever-increasing impact along the U.S.-Mexico border as criminal activity increasingly spills over to the U.S. side. U.S. drug demand is the essential precursor to the nexus of narcotrafficking, gang rivalries, murders, kidnapping, and torture while Mexican poverty, corruption, and institutional dysfunction are some basic components. U.S. policy has explicitly recognized the need for both countries to work together to solve a mutual problem. Attorney General Holder has encouraged “increased cooperation between the U.S. and Mexican governments.”¹ Mutual cooperation is likely the only way the U.S. can promote its interests with regard to Mexico.

The drug trade, with all its ramifications, is Mexico’s greatest threat, and it represents a significant threat to the U.S. as well. The U.S. and Mexico have mutual national interests in substantially reducing the flow of illicit drugs, money, and guns across the Southwest border while we preserve the security of people and goods. To advance these interests, both countries will need to apply all the elements of power, including the military. Indeed, the U.S. National Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy directs that the Department of Defense will “provide support to these efforts in authorized areas, subject to the availability of resources, and at the request of appropriate federal, state, local, or foreign officials”² Thus the U.S. military, including SOF, can play an important role in cooperative efforts with the Mexican government to achieve mutual interests in North America.

Dr. Graham Turbiville's account of U.S. military engagement with Mexico provides a broad account of the interaction among the military elements of both countries from 1846 to the present day. He describes the evolution of the Mexican military toward a more capable and modern force. Especially informative for the special operations reader is the advent of numerous special operations units within the military and some civil elements. As noted, this has fostered reciprocal opportunities for SOF training and education. Much of past U.S. training with the Mexican military has been conducted in phased, measured ways because of Mexico's constitutional concerns for having foreign troops on Mexican soil and as a result of the strategic culture of the Mexican military establishment, which is more sensitive about lost territory and lost battles than to any fundamental aversion to mutually beneficial cooperation with the U.S. military.

As Dr. Turbiville indicates herein, greater interaction among the militaries is more likely to occur with a culturally respectful approach to Mexico's military leadership and a nod to historical and institutional sensitivities. In addition to the homologation of SOF tactics, techniques, and procedures, mutual understanding and cooperation is fostered through education. In the past 12 months, Joint Special Operations University—the education component of the United States Special Operations Command—has twice conducted seminars in Mexico involving officers of the Sedena and the Semar and law enforcement elements. In the current environment of insurgency, narcotrafficking, and a threatened government under stress, educational activities represent an effective "indirect approach" toward achieving national interests. The engine of opportunity for a closer working relationship with Mexico can be facilitated with ample educational activities that bring officers of both countries together in an intellectually nurturing environment. One can expect that the principal role for U.S. SOF concerning U.S. military engagement with Mexico will be training and education activities involving both countries. An active education program involving the militaries of both countries is a viable construct for creating and sustaining sound U.S.-Mexico security relationships in a manner that is amenable to the strategic culture of the Mexican military as well as U.S. interests for security along the border.

Kenneth H. Poole
Director, JSOU Strategic Studies Department

About the Author

Dr. Graham Turbiville is an associate fellow with the JSOU Strategic Studies Department. At JSOU, his research has been centered on a range of regional and transnational threats to include insurgency, terrorism, the development of foreign Special Operations Forces (SOF), and foreign perspectives of U.S. and allied capabilities and vulnerabilities. Dr. Turbiville also serves as a senior consultant and researcher for a Department of Defense (DoD)/Intelligence Community program dealing with geographic and cultural intelligence in several areas of the world and which produces history-based assessments of tribal/clan societies in contemporary war and conflict.

He received his B.A. in Foreign Languages from Southern Illinois University, M.A. in Russian Studies from George Washington University, and Ph.D. in History from the University of Montana. Dr. Turbiville served 30 years in the intelligence community analytical and leadership positions at the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Department of the Army. These positions included director/chief of long-range and current intelligence offices and directorates, director of a Joint Reserve Intelligence Center, and other assignments dealing with foreign combined arms, security, and SOF.

Dr. Turbiville has authored many monographs and studies for military, law enforcement, and intelligence venues. His articles have appeared in several publications, including *Special Warfare*, *Military Review*, *Marine Corps Gazette*, *Infantry*, *Army*, *International Defense Review*, *The Military Engineer*, *ALOG: Army Logistian*, *Low Intensity Conflict and Law Enforcement*, *Transnational Organized Crime*, *Crime and Justice International*, *Strategic Review*, *RUSI: Journal of the Royal United Service Institute*, *Global Crime*, *Journal of Soviet Military Studies*, and *National Guard*. Edited works include *Global Dimensions of High Intensity Crime and Low Intensity Conflict* and the three-volume National Defense University Press series, *The Voroshilov Lectures*—a collection of authoritative, classified Soviet General Staff Academy writings on strategy, operational art, and tactics acquired clandestinely in the then USSR by a foreign officer.

What follows are other JSOU publications by Dr. Turbiville:

- a. *Russian Special Forces: Issues of Loyalty, Corruption and the Fight Against Terror* (August 2005)

- b. *Logistic Support and Insurgency, Guerrilla Sustainment and Applied Lessons of Soviet Insurgent Warfare: Why It Should Still Be Studied* (October 2005)
- c. *Hunting Leadership Targets in COIN and Counterterrorist Operations* (June 2007)
- d. *Private Security Infrastructure Abroad* (November 2007)
- e. *Guerrilla Counterintelligence* (January 2009).

U.S. Military Engagement with Mexico: Uneasy Past and Challenging Future

1. Introduction

Mexico's deteriorating security environment over the last 24 months has been accompanied by growing United States (U.S.) concerns over the stability of an important ally and key trading partner. The associated prospects of intensified cross-border narcoviolence, waves of refugees, other humanitarian emergencies, and new international terrorist staging opportunities have joined an already challenging border security milieu. New cooperative initiatives and aid spurred by these developments involve a number of U.S. Government institutions, particularly those having political, economic, and law enforcement venues.

The U.S. Department of Defense and Armed Forces also remain engaged in ways that promise to develop and change as both countries judge to be appropriate, useful, and feasible. This monograph addresses major benchmarks in U.S.-Mexican military relations generally, reviews events over the last 40 years as U.S.-Mexican military relationships have unfolded, and in particular focuses on changes and trends underway since the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on U.S. targets.³

Included in these developments—and of some importance to U.S. special operations planning—is Mexico's major commitment since 1995 to create, train, and employ Special Operations Forces (SOF) of various types. The special operations component of U.S. military training and assistance seems destined to grow in importance as Mexican special operators work to master and apply counterterrorist and counterinsurgency skills. To a far greater extent than initially envisioned, these forces are needed to defeat militarized narcoparamilitaries that surpass Mexico's federal, state, and municipal law enforcement capabilities. Since 1995 there has been notable U.S.-Mexican military consensus on the importance of such forces and capabilities to address complex 21st century threats ranging from traditional Mexican security problems to new phenomena like those posed by

narcoparamilitaries and faltering law enforcement effectiveness.⁴ Initially, however, it is useful to highlight the earliest U.S.-Mexican military relations that limited U.S.-Mexican relations for many decades and continue to exercise a measure of influence today.

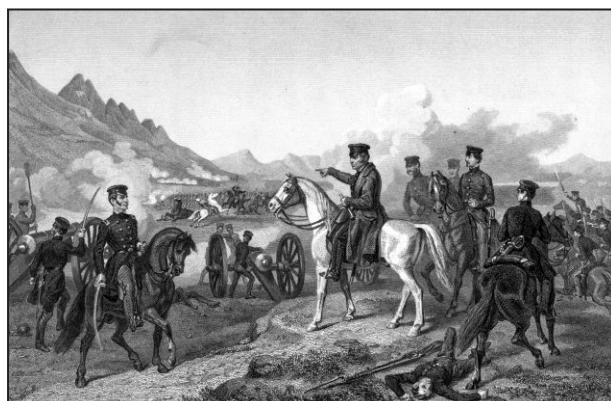
2. A Rough Historical Road

His quick eye has numbered the mustering bands,
 And he points to the enemy's flag,
 While the battery answers the old man commands,
 "A little more grape, Captain Bragg."

— General Zachary Taylor's supposed order to one of his artillery battery commanders, Captain Braxton Bragg, at the Battle of Buena Vista, 23 February 1847. From the song "A Little More Grape Capt. Bragg" by William J. Lemon.

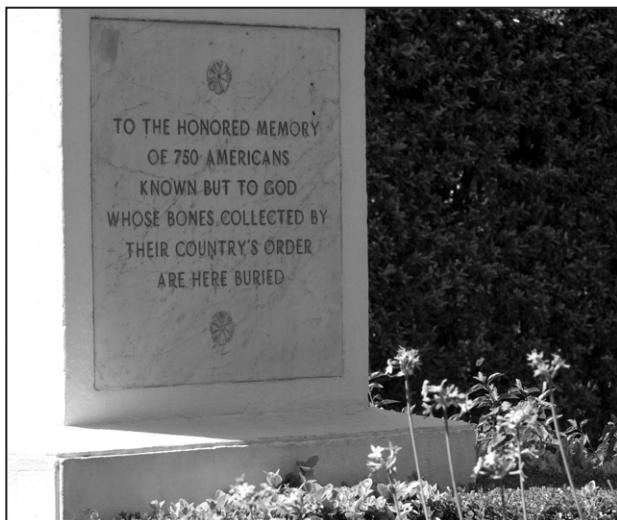
One of the early defining events of U.S.-Mexican military relations occurred in late February 1847 on a battlefield near the city of Saltillo in northern Mexico. War between the two young republics had begun in 1846, sparked principally by escalating U.S.-Mexican tensions over the 1845 entry of Texas into the United States and broader U.S. efforts to purchase New Mexico and California provinces.⁵ The Battle of Buena Vista—called the Battle of Angostura by Mexico—followed on U.S. successes at Palo Alto, Monterrey, and other engagements some months earlier. It was ranked by some as a draw on the tactical level. It was clearly transformed into a strategic defeat for Mexico, however, when the morning after a hard day's fighting, American reconnaissance discovered that General Santa Anna had hastily withdrawn his numerically superior forces from the field and departed.⁶

Battle of Buena Vista, engraving from a painting by William. H. Powell, public domain, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.



For the United States, the battle was immediately celebrated back home. General Taylor's apocryphal "a little more grape" order to Braxton Bragg sparked patriotic song, poems, prints, and other tributes associated with the battle.⁷ In substantial measure, this helped propel Taylor into the U.S. Presidency the following year and earned Braxton Bragg a promotion to lieutenant colonel for the remarkable fire support provided by his three-gun battery that day (some 750 rounds substantially balancing the odds for Taylor's outnumbered force).

For Mexico, however, the battle was a bitter event, seen as a well-fought near victory, lost only because of Santa Anna's precipitous withdrawal. It was preceded and followed by other lost battles, eventual capitulation to include the occupation of Mexico City by General Winfield Scott, and the surrender of half of its national territory to the United States. While not quite as distant in time as it seems—the last veteran not dying until 1929 and last widow surviving until 1963—the battle of Buena Vista is scarcely thought of by the American public today. However, a few citizens on both sides of the border still living today have fathers and grandfathers born on U.S. territory that once was Mexico.



This memorial at the entry to Mexico City National Cemetery honors 750 unknown Americans killed during the Mexican-American War. Some 813 other U.S. military veterans, family members, and U.S. Diplomatic Service members are also interred there. Photo by MSgt Adam M. Stump.

The battle remains commemorated in Mexico, including the 2008 opening of a new Saltillo museum on the 161th anniversary of the Buena Vista fight. In addition, the course and consequences of "The North American Intervention of 1847," which began on a Mexican-perceived "pretext," remains a

source of enduring mistrust of U.S. intentions within the Mexican military establishment. In its steepest form, many Mexicans in and out of uniform regard the war and its consequences as raw territorial aggression against the new Republic. It was seen to take advantage of Mexico's weakened economic resources and limited numbers of inferior arms and equipment and to force acceptance of the unduly harsh Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in February 1848. As frequently repeated in Mexican writings, the treaty resulted in the loss of lingering Texas Revolution territorial claims as well as the 525,000 square miles that comprises today's New Mexico, Arizona, and California and substantial parts of several other western states.

In the decades following the Guadalupe Hidalgo Treaty, continuing Mexican complaints included charges of U.S. failures to scrupulously honor pre-war Mexican-Spanish land grants and unjust treatment of former Mexican citizens. Private, criminal, semiofficial and official meddling in various mixtures by Mexican and U.S. parties included off-and-on armed clashes and violence along the border. General Pershing's 1916-1917 Punitive Expedition deep into Mexico's Chihuahua State in retaliation for Pancho Villa's raid on Columbus, New Mexico was an especially notable consequence of the Mexican Revolution. The U.S. Army's successful June 1919 intervention and attack into the Mexican city of Juárez and environs marked a final chapter in what Mexican historians characterize as major military violations of Mexican sovereignty. U.S. forces, in haphazard and unsanctioned cooperation with Mexican federal troops already fighting there, routed Pancho Villa's rebels with a large infantry, horse cavalry, and artillery force that featured the U.S. Army's last major cavalry charge. Mexican authorities were at least publicly outraged by the latest U.S. military violation of national sovereignty.⁸



Pilots of the famed 201st Mexican Fighter Squadron in front of their P-47 Thunderbolts at Luzon, Philippines, July 1945. Historic World War II photograph courtesy of historylink101.com.

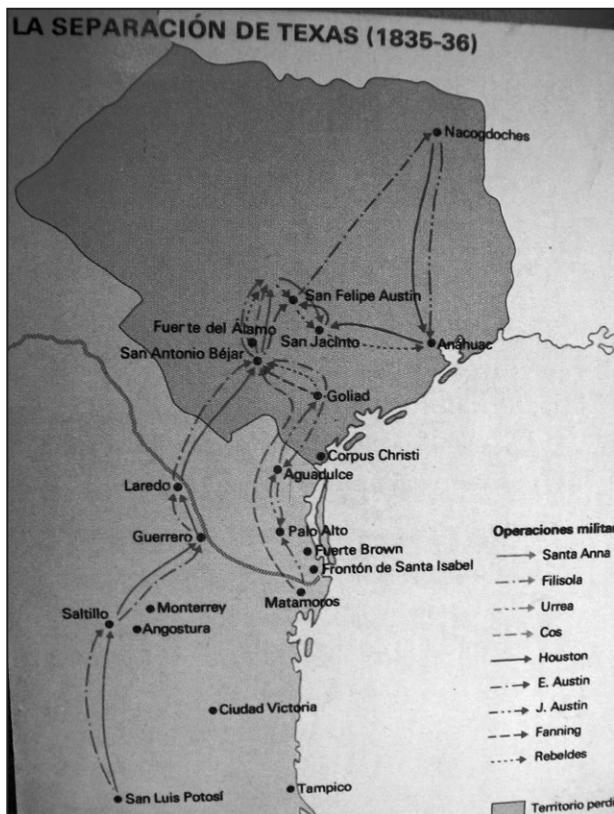
In the years from the Mexican Revolution until the eve of World War II, a succession of Mexican governments were more concerned with internal issues and U.S. economic activities and their impact on Mexico than with immediate concerns about U.S. military intervention. Military-to-military contacts were quite limited and generally cool. The approach of World War II, however, seemed to constitute a sea-change in U.S. Mexican relations. German and Japanese overtures to Mexico regarding oil and other resource purchases along with plans for subversion were among several issues prompting closer U.S. attention to Mexico.

For Mexico, economic needs, internal political problems relieved by U.S. early recognition of a successful but challenged presidential candidate, and German U-boat attacks on Mexican shipping facilitated Mexico's entry on the side of the Western Allies. Mexico's participation as a wartime ally against the Axis Powers garnered the country Lend Lease and training support while they, with a supportive Mexican population, served as a major provider of resources to the U.S. and Allies. This included human resources as well, with Mexican contract workers under the newly established Bracero Program (1942–1964) traveling to the U.S. to undertake agricultural and industrial jobs in a labor-constrained economy. Mexico also took the historically unprecedented move of establishing what was called the "Mexican Expeditionary Air Force" to fight beyond Mexico's borders. The brave and competent combat role in Mexico's P-47 Thunderbolt-flying *Escuadron Aereo de Pelea 201* (201st Mexican Fighter Squadron in the Philippines and region) included hundreds of offensive combat sorties in ground attack, fighter sweep, dive bombing, and other roles.

The first Mexican combat operations abroad garnered U.S. appreciation at the time, but had long-term effects as well. World War II participation contributed greatly to Mexican military modernization and training, improved mutual perceptions among military personnel of both nations, and created precedent for future forms of military-to-military cooperation. The establishment of the Joint Mexican-United States Defense Commission (JMUSDC) in 1942 was particularly important as a model in that regard. The JMUSDC was integral in coordinating joint wartime defense activities, including Lend Lease and training, and constitutes one of the earliest joint cooperative forums with strong military content. Pilots with World War II combat experience formed important Mexican Air Force cadres

and senior Air Force leadership after the war. Military interaction on many other levels had residual influence as well, and Mexican training centers were reorganized and improved based on those U.S. practices that were judged beneficial.⁹

Mexican postwar domestic concerns and a U.S. focus on growing Cold War issues around the world eclipsed in some measure the closer military ties that had characterized World War II. While state-to-state relations were marked by careful neutrality or near indifference, limited numbers of Mexican military personnel participated in military-educational and other training venues in the U.S. This was particularly true for flight training that increased Mexican Air Force capabilities and indirectly contributed to the growth of Mexican civil aviation as some pilots entered into the civil aviation market. Relations were far from close, however, and official relationships were largely formal and distant.



This map at the Museum of Intervention (located in the Coyoacan borough of Mexico City) illustrates the campaign of the 1836 Texas Revolution, in which Mexico lost Texas a decade before the Mexican-American War. Photo by Jaontiveros, courtesy Wikimdia Commons.

All of this, of course, has been long understood on a superficial level by the U.S. military. This recent and more distant history, however, has been examined, considered, and evaluated with some suspicion by the Mexican armed forces, which has retained a far deeper level of resentment and with an institutional memory of past interventions. Regrettably, this has from time to time been reinforced in unthinking ways.

It is worth recalling that Mexico maintains a National Museum of Interventions (*Museo Nacional de las Intervenciones*) outside of Mexico City. The museum building—still marked by bullet holes—was formerly a monastery. It was occupied by Mexican troops who unsuccessfully tried to stop the U.S. advance on the capital in 1846 at what became known as the Battle of Churubusco.

Far from being established in the distant past, the museum was built in 1980 and prominently features “northern” interventions in the Texas Revolution and Mexican-American War periods among other foreign military interventions. While a fine and interesting museum in one respect, it also highlights the centrality of the Mexican-American War in Mexico’s history.¹⁰ It was not until quite recent years that the U.S. began to place more focused attention on acknowledging and reducing residual Mexican—and particularly Mexican military—distrust and reluctance to participate in proposed cooperative ventures and interaction of various forms.

3. U.S.-Mexican Military Relations, 1970 to 2009

The four decades of U.S.-Mexican military relations from 1970 to 2009 have been marked by numerous domestic and outside developments that have shaped the nature of this interaction. Principal decision-making has rested on the Mexican executive leadership in the person of the President within constitutional and other legislative/congressional frameworks and importantly, on the two uniformed officers who head the armed forces. The latter comprise the Secretary of National Defense (*Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional*, the *Sedena*) leading the Army and Air Force, and the Secretary of the Navy (*Secretaría de Marina*, the *Semar*), heading the Navy and Marine (Naval Infantry) and other special purpose forces.

Mexican presidents serve a term of 6 years, and the Secretaries of National Defense and Navy—named by the President—typically serve throughout that same period. Since 1970, there have been seven Presidents, seven Secretaries of National Defense, and eight Secretaries of the Navy. (See Table 1.) Navy Secretary Admiral Mauricio Scheleske (Schleske) Sánchez, who served under President Carlos Salinas for just 2 years, resigned under a cloud and was replaced for the remainder of his term. Sailors under the admiral's control allegedly smuggled drugs from Matamoros Naval Base to Texas, and he was himself alleged to have several hundred thousand dollars in undisclosed Houston real estate holdings, part of which he clumsily attempted to hide.¹¹

This situation was an apparent anomaly for the very top of the defense leadership, however, and the Secretaries in this period played central roles in defining the extent of U.S.-Mexican military cooperation. The 1970–1995 period served as prelude to the fully developed threats that challenge the Mexican leadership today—the four most prominent being narcotrafficking, burgeoning narcoviolence, lingering and periodically acute insurgency, and corruption. All of these—and for the U.S. the growing criminal spillover into U.S. territory together with high level of illegal immigration and human rights allegations against Mexican security forces—began to shape current U.S.-Mexican interaction. Some general and specific features of this interaction as it has developed in several periods are addressed below.

Table 1. Mexican Presidents, Secretaries of National Defense, and Secretaries of the Navy: 1970 to 2012

President Luis Echeverría	1 Dec 1970 to 30 Nov 1976	PRI—Institutional Revolutionary Party
Secretary of National Defense	Hermenegildo Cuenca Díaz	
Secretary of the Navy	Almirante Luis Bravo Carrera	
President José López Portillo	1 Dec 1976 to 30 Nov 1982	PRI
Secretary of National Defense	Félix Galván López	
Secretary of the Navy	Almirante Ricardo Cházaro Lara	
President Miguel de la Madrid	1 Dec 1982 to 30 Nov 1988	PRI
Secretary of National Defense	Juan Arévalo Gardoqui	
Secretary of the Navy	Almirante Miguel Angel Gómez Ortega	
President Carlos Salinas de Gortari	1 Dec 1988 to 30 Nov 1994	PRI
Secretary of National Defense	Antonio Riviello Bazán	
Secretary of the Navy	Almirante Mauricio Scheleske Sánchez (1 Dec 1988 to 18 Jul 1990) and Almirante Luis Carlos Ruano Angulo (18 Jul to 1 Dec 1994)	
President Ernesto Zedillo	1 Dec 1994 to 30 Nov 2000	PRI
Secretary of National Defense	Enrique Cervantes Aguirre	
Secretary of the Navy	Almirante José Ramón Lorenzo Franco	
President Vicente Fox	1 Dec 2000 to 30 Nov 2006	PAN—National Action Party *
Secretary of National Defense	Gerardo Clemente Ricardo Vega García	
Secretary of the Navy	Almirante Marco Antonio Peyrot González	
President Felipe Calderón	1 Dec 2006 to 30 Nov 2012	PAN
Secretary of National Defense	Guillermo Galván Galván	
Secretary of the Navy	Almirante Mariano Francisco Saynez Mendoza	

* The first non-PRI President in 70 years of domination

U.S.-Mexican Military Relations, 1970 to 1995. A principal feature of U.S.-Mexican military-to-military interaction during this period was the limited participation of Mexican service members in training and military-education venues. U.S. officers, in limited numbers as well, also attended some analogous Mexican training-educational venues.

A prominent training institution for Mexican armed forces personnel—and certainly the best known—has been the School of the Americas (SOA), initially established in Panama in 1946 (under a different name), relocated to Fort Benning, Georgia in 1984, and renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHISC) in 2001.¹² During the first 49 years of SOA's existence—that is, up until 1995—the school trained the relatively modest number of 766 Mexican military personnel in topics that included courses for combat, combat support, and combat service support officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) as well as leadership, intelligence, counterinsurgency, and specialized or technical skills. Mexican military and naval personnel also attended other U.S. military schools and courses for each service, again in small numbers. These included the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas and the Air Force and Navy counterparts. Mexican officers also began to attend higher level U.S. military-educational institutions as well. Grant funding and regulations for these programs were formalized under the Arms Export Control Act of 1976, which among other things established the international training program known as International Military Education and Training (IMET). During this time, as will be discussed, officers who had received U.S. training began to play a larger role in dealing with Mexico's changing internal threat environment.

U.S. officers for their part also participated in military-educational venues, principally at the Command and Staff College level. For Mexico, these military-educational institutions were the Superior War College (for the Army and Air Force), and for the Navy, the Center of Superior Naval Studies. Like the U.S. counterparts, courses covered the gamut of topics associated with military administration and staff work, strategy and tactics, logistics, military history, international law, leadership, and other topics.¹³

As the 1970s began, such military-to-military programs continued on a more or less steady and unremarkable level. The U.S. was principally focused on Cold War issues in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia; several particularly acute insurgencies around the world included Latin America and for

the first half of the decade, the war in Vietnam. For Mexico, the first half of the 1970s marked a number of challenges to Mexican national security and public safety under the leadership of Mexican President Luis Echeverría (1970 to 1976), and his Secretary of National Defense, Secretary, General Hermenegildo Cuenca Díaz, and the Secretary of the Navy, Admiral Luis Bravo Carrera, both serving for the same period. These would come to shape changing perceptions of cooperation for both Mexico and the United States and merit a brief description here.

The Mexican military's reputation had been damaged in the late 1960s by the Army's role in killing an unknown number—possibly up to several hundred—of demonstrators during the 1968 Mexico City "Tlatelolco Massacre" when troops fired into the crowd of student and other protestors. Students during this period had become increasingly militant regarding jobs, the economy and various social issues, not unlike student movements worldwide. In Mexico, there was an especially acute concern about foreign communist support and agitation that was not entirely unjustified.

At the same time, as student unrest and activism grew, armed insurgent groups that had first appeared in the 1960s were expanding. Some were demonstrably supported by foreign communist countries, but in any case typically adhered to leftist agendas of various types. While the insurgent challenge did not rise to a level that threatened the government—and the guerrillas could not openly challenge the Army—by the 1970s their increasing visible raids, ambushes, kidnappings, fund-raising robberies, and communiqués and statements came to preoccupy the military and the police. Mexican authorities also feared that an insurgency on the level of others that had appeared in Latin America might infect Mexico as well. Success against the guerrillas was not easy to come by, however, and the 1967–1974 hunt for Lucio Cabañas, leader of the Party of the Poor (PDLP) and its Peasant Brigade of Execution is the best case in point. It also constituted a major impetus to seek a professionalized force better trained to deal with developing threats.

A range of military and law enforcement resources was employed including Sedena Army and Air Force components, Semar Navy and Marines in limited roles, and state and federal Judicial Police including special units, municipal police elements, and other elements. The hunt for Cabañas involved tens of thousands of military troops and the large deployment and involvement of police and associated law enforcement personnel. Lucio

Cabañas was tracked down and killed in 1974, and his guerrillas destroyed or dispersed. However, the Army and police human rights abuses, committed as the most vigorous military means were employed to deal with an armed threat, still overshadow the Government aim of ending insurgency in the area. A seeming military success, it was obtained at a cost that contributed to the continued proliferation of small guerrilla groups in Guerrero and elsewhere and shaped the development of the Mexican armed forces in a number of ways.¹⁴ It was immediately clear that the Army was not well organized and trained to prosecute a counterinsurgency campaign.

Compelling evidence—not revealed until several decades after the events—has shown that President Echeverría delivered orders to crush the guerrillas with all the force necessary, and the architect of the overall plan was the Secretary of National Defense, Hermenegildo Cuenca Díaz.¹⁵ Diaz was one of the few remaining Mexican senior officers still on active duty who had seen combat during the Mexican Revolution. He had participated in some 50 battles and had served as a liaison officer between Mexico and the United States in San Antonio, Texas. His view of seeking closer training ties with the U.S. military might be imagined, given his experience in the Mexican Revolution and the several interventions that the U.S. undertook in Mexico during the Revolutionary period.

While a Mexican interest in more direct U.S. training was not immediately visible, the then-serving defense leadership and their immediate successors recognized their military shortcomings and the need to draw on U.S. experience where applicable. A post-Cabañas counterinsurgency “reform” program began soon after the guerrilla leader’s death. It was characterized by post-operational judgments on performance that termed the previous operations as full of “errors” and “stupidities.” The Defense leadership developed a 1975 Counterinsurgency Plan that was prosecuted throughout the rest of the decade and beyond. It began to be implemented more fully during the next Mexican national administration led by President José López Portillo (1 December 1976 to 30 November 1982), with Defense leadership for the same period under Secretary of National Defense, General Félix Galván López, and Secretary of the Navy, Admiral Ricardo Cházaro Lara.

A Counterinsurgency Patrol Course dubbed “Cupac” (*Curso de Patrullas Contrainsurgentes*) featured exercises set in Guerrero State, an area in which guerilla activity had been, and was projected to be, most developed. New

intelligence-gathering approaches were adopted to include agent and guide selection, interrogation, dealing with disinformation, and other elements. New, better-trained forces were a principal objective, as was a better codified doctrine for counterinsurgency. In this effort, the Mexican Defense leadership drew heavily on Mexican graduates from the then Panama-based School of the Americas' Jungle Operations course, from which there had been Mexican graduates since the mid-1960s. Mexican instructors and cadres were staffed both from recent School of the Americas graduates and from those who had graduated earlier and participated in the earlier counterinsurgency campaigns.¹⁶

In addition to counterinsurgency concerns, the employment of Mexican military units in counterdrug operations—to include interdiction, and eradication—appeared and gained momentum during the administration of President Portillo. At this time, the appearance of fully developed Mexican cartels was some years in the future. Mexico was still primarily a drug transit state, and the developing Mexican drug organizations mainly performed intermediate reception, protection, transport, and distribution roles for the large Colombian drug trafficking organizations. However, the greater cultivation and export of marijuana was already apparent, poppy cultivation and processing into heroin was gaining a foothold, Mexican methamphetamine production south and north of the border was growing, and consumer/end-user countries like the U.S. in particular were demanding more effective Mexican assistance in attacking the drug flow.

Military counterdrug measures—undermined by corrupt and ineffective law enforcement—developed into a more “systematic campaign” during the tenure of Miguel de la Madrid (1982–1988) and his successor Carlos Salinas Gotari (1988–1994), and intensified all the more under President Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000).¹⁷ Mexican and U.S. commentators assert that the increasingly greater involvement of Mexican military units in counterdrug operations during this period was a direct consequence of U.S. pressure and American calls to “confront drug trafficking as if it were a foreign invasion.”¹⁸

Mexican training at the SOA continued at relatively modest levels. According to one source, between 1981 and 1990, 539 Mexican officers attended the SOA, who were instructed in skills that included military intelligence (19 personnel); psychological operations (3), commando operations (270); training techniques (210); counterdrug operations (12); and with some 268 trained

in other specialties. Beginning in 1990, and continuing up to 1997, SOA trained some 623 Mexican military personnel to include 121 who received military intelligence training; 29 personnel in psychological operations; some 163 instructed in training techniques and approaches; 32 instructed in educational administration; 56 who received unspecified special Mexican training; 30 who got commando training; 20 personnel given instruction in civil-military operations; 70 soldiers instructed in counterdrug operations; and 102 Mexican military personnel trained in other areas.¹⁹

Mexican concerns about terrorism at hosted international events had first surfaced in the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City, and other potential internal contingencies grew in the mid-1980s. That worry—reinforced by the murder of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Games—was added to the already realized threats of drug cultivation, trafficking, and insurgent activity. A military initiative that was to have future implications for Mexican force structure and U.S.-Mexican military interaction, together with it resulted in the 1986 creation of a Rapid Response Force (*Fuerza de Intervención Rápida*), which by 1990 had become the first Airmobile Special Forces Group (*Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales*—GAFE, GAFES in plural form).

The sudden and initially successful appearance in January 1994 of the *Zapatista* insurgents (Zapatista National Liberation Army—EZLN) and near simultaneous resurgence of small armed groups in Guerrero and elsewhere added a final incentive to sweeping military transformation. At the same time, it began to change U.S.-Mexican military collaboration. These multiple threats served as a catalyst for a Defense transformation plan that was developed and began to be implemented in 1995. The Sedena—in its 1995 *Mexican Army and Air Force Development Plan*—set out the need for important future changes. The *Development Plan* also identified “the fight against drug trafficking” as a task in which the military would participate more directly, an assertion already evident.²⁰ The distinction among drug traffickers, arms traffickers, other heavy armed criminal groups and bandits, or insurgents was not clear. As a consequence, military support to law enforcement has been directed against a variety of targets, sometimes identified generically in Spanish military commentary as *maleantes* (bad or evil ones).

More specifically, a Mexican commentator with access to the study summarized the coming fundamental military change in this way:

Under its media-astute leader *Subcomandante Marcos*, the Zapatista National Liberation Army emerged for public view in January 1994 with armed operations in Chiapas State that caught the Mexican Army by surprise. Photo by Jose Villa, VillaPhotography@gmail.com.



From an Army of slow and heavy structures, scarce capability to react, and outdated training, a military force unknown in Mexico is beginning to be created. The new Mexican Army, one basing its strength on green berets, commando units, elite forces, assault troops, is already under way. Starting in January 1995, high ranking military leaders embarked on a profound reorganization of the Army as never seen before, the general outline of which is contained in a confidential document entitled *The Mexican Army and Air Force Development Plan* and its annex. Those documents contain the sketches of the Mexican Army of the 21st century. For example, the following is included:

- a. The organization of the Army into smaller, highly qualified commando units that will have great mobility, precision, and effectiveness
- b. The shaping of a true military intelligence system
- c. The laying of the foundations for the creation of a future unified body that will coordinate the actions of the Air Force, the Marines, and the Army

- d. The carrying out of joint operations with the Mexican Navy; the last joint operations were carried out in 1964
- e. The development of the Air Force by furnishing it with new equipment
- f. The purchase of sophisticated equipment and weapons
- g. The technological and computer ‘revolution’ within the armed forces
- h. The creation of ‘special forces’ squadrons in each military region, particularly in Chiapas and Guerrero; they will be equipped with sophisticated equipment and weapons
- i. The incorporation of civilians onto the Army roster
- j. And last but not least, the radical redefinition of the national security concept the military hierarchy has had.

Therefore, we are talking about an Army whose main tasks will be the fight against insurgents and the fight against drugs.²¹

As noted, the *The Mexican Army and Air Force Development Plan* called for forming more, smaller, highly qualified commando groups—that is, more Airborne Special Forces Groups (GAFES) of the prototype prior mentioned—designed to conduct counterinsurgency and counterdrug operations against increasingly violent trafficking groups and armed groups whose potential remained ambiguous. These include a more centralized Special Forces command element and school as well as special units that did receive explicit attention at the time. Implicit in this was the need for

Troops of the Paratroop Rifle Brigade (Brigada de Fusileros Paracaidistas) who have been receiving additional training

for operations against the drug cartels. Shown here, Brigade components participate in a Mexico City ceremony involving Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. Photo by MSgt Adam M. Stump.



intensified training, a requirement that would need specialized support from outside of Mexico as substantial SOF were created and other modernization efforts were initiated.

Military training and exchanges began to increase in the mid-1990s, albeit more slowly than some U.S. policymakers would have liked. Mexico's more visible security problems like narcotrafficking, it was thought, might be combated more effectively by supporting improvements in training and equipment for Mexican military forces engaged in counterdrug operations. The relatively few U.S. analysts studying Mexican military institutions at this time noted the difficulties created by the military's continued isolation and aversion to outside examination. A few distinguished U.S. scholars noted the difficulty in assessing an organization that guards its access very carefully.²² Among these, Colonel John Cope did an excellent job of describing the history of U.S.-Mexican military relations, including past and recent developments in U.S.-Mexican military-to-military contacts and especially U.S. efforts from the late 1980s to 1995 that were intended to build a stronger relationship through various liaison venues and carefully instituted military assistance programs.²³

The visit of General Gordon Sullivan, U.S. Army Chief of Staff, to meet with the Mexican Secretary of National Defense, General Antonio Riviello, was a particularly important benchmark. A principal goal of General Sullivan's visit was "to discuss the growth of Mexican Army and Army-to-Army relations."²⁴ He addressed the progress already made, including initiatives constituting liaison visit and staff talks, airborne training, and additional security assistance along with continued IMET and in-country training. General Sullivan made a particular point of endorsing the next iteration of the Border Commander's Conference series (then under the auspices of U.S. Fifth Army) that annually brings together the principal U.S. and Mexican military leaders on each side of the border. Mexican military hosts briefed Sullivan on their counterdrug operations including a tour of key areas of marijuana and poppy cultivation.²⁵

The U.S. Army Chief of Staff was impressed with Mexican military performance and its seriousness in further improving forces. He judged that the U.S. military could "help the Mexican army structure a program of reform that will enhance their role in a democratic society." In addition to other dimensions, he directed that early U.S. follow-up to his visit be focused to:

GEN Gordon R. Sullivan, U.S. Army Chief of Staff from 1991 to 1995, was instrumental in laying the groundwork for future U.S.-Mexican military interaction. Mexican officers have noted the excellent rapport that he established with his counterparts in the Mexican military. U.S. Army photo by Russell Roederer, 1992.



- a. Share U.S. experiences and lessons learned regarding how media can best be informed of military activities as befits a democratic society.
- b. Develop a better understanding of Mexican military history and institutions in order to further relationships.
- c. Prepare and share materials on the prevention of human rights and dealing with allegations of atrocities.
- d. Translate a new field manual (FM 100-1, *The Profession of Arms*) into Spanish.
- e. Assure military leadership on the border develops closer personal relationships with the appropriate Mexican counterpart.
- f. Assign responsibility to the Latin American (LATAM) Task Force for monitoring interaction with Mexico, to include Mobile Training Team (MTT) and Personnel Exchange Program (PEP) among other requirements.

To a greater extent than may be common in the U.S. Army, the Mexican military often takes some care in evaluating the perceived character and demeanor of important foreign visitors. In this regard, General Sullivan deeply impressed the Mexican leadership and what they judged as his

genuine interest in, and reaction to, what he encountered on his visit, and this had a deep and positive impression.²⁶ A measure of this regard was the attendance of General Riviello's successor, General Enrique Cervantes (later Secretary of National Defense under President Vicente Fox) at General Sullivan's retirement ceremony in Washington, D.C.²⁷ As Colonel Cope pointed out, by 1995 the efforts of Army Chief of Staff General Gordon Sullivan and others had resulted in warming, but still touchy, military ties in several areas and far more robust projections for IMET fund grants along with limited military sales.²⁸

A year and a half following General Sullivan's talks in Mexico, an October 1995 visit of U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry to Mexico signaled the acceleration of U.S. security assistance programs. Perry's visit was widely publicized in Mexico and included rebroadcasts of portions of his presentation at Military Camp No. 1. In his speech, he thanked the Mexican military for its counterdrug successes, noted ongoing military education and training efforts, and pointed to U.S.-sponsored military modernization plans that would help Mexico protect its air and sea sovereignty. Perry met with Mexican Defense Secretary, General Enrique Cervantes, and with President Zedillo; cooperation in five areas were discussed: disaster relief, drug trafficking, naval sovereignty, and the "implementation of an equipment-updating program."²⁹ Cooperation in task forces, it was agreed, would continue and involve other agencies.

U.S.-Mexican Military Relations, 1996 to 2000. In a number of ways, accelerating military assistance programs following the 1995 Perry meeting were supportive of the Sedena's "confidential" *Mexican Army and Air Force Development Plan*. Security challenges that required the use of the military continued to grow and be discussed by both countries. Mexican Secretary of National Defense, General Enrique Cervantes Aguirre, visited Perry in Washington, D.C. from 22 to 26 April 1996. Perry and Cervantes were briefed by the Bilateral Working Group and subworking groups on the progress of training programs for Special Forces (much at Fort Bragg, North Carolina), pilots, mechanics, Navy personnel, and others. They were also briefed on senior leadership and specialist visits, military-educational exchanges, equipment and force structure program progress, humanitarian and disaster relief cooperation, and many other issues.³⁰ President Zedillo's October 1996 judgment affirmed what had long since concluded—that the

drug trade had become the biggest threat to Mexican national security. The Presidential assertion underscored both Mexican and U.S. official concern and justified the increased use of military forces and military personnel cadres seconded to police organizations to combat it.³¹ Despite legislative and other challenges to the employment of military forces in these roles, the Mexican Supreme Court determined in March 1996 that “the Army, Air Force, and Navy may intervene in public security matters as long as civilian authorities, even the government itself, request it.”³²

Mexico’s armed forces grew in size, a response to the insurgencies and its growing counterdrug and law enforcement roles. According to Mexican sources, by late 1996 Sedena forces had increased some 34 percent in size to a total of 237,500 troops and continued to grow.³³ As part of its military expansion, Mexico began to increase the number and capabilities of SOF in accord with the *Development Plan*. These included, in particular, the company-size GAFES units reportedly deployed in most states around the country, with four in Chiapas, three in Guerrero, and two each in Tabasco, Puebla, Oaxaca, and Veracruz.³⁴ In a further expansion of Special Forces type units, the Sedena announced in late summer 1999 that it was forming 36 Special Forces Amphibious Groups (*Grupos Anfibios de Fuerzas Especiales*—GANFES) for counterdrug operations.

GANFES are Marine-like counterparts to the GAFES, under Army command, that are tasked to carry out riverine and coastal operations.³⁵ But the performance of GAFES and some other units have been disappointing as well. During this period, GAFE personnel were implicated in torture and illegal detentions and had reportedly been parceled out for roles other than those for which they were trained. This was the case for those GAFE elements assigned to Mexico City’s International Airport, a group subsequently charged with drug and illegal immigrant smuggling while ostensibly guarding against such crimes at the airport.³⁶ In any event, despite training and efforts to vet candidates for elite units like GAFE and other forces, corruption continues to frustrate both Mexican and U.S. officials.

The territorial and command reorganizations, training improvements, emphasis on Special Forces, mobility, communications and intelligence, and other issues were strongly supported by the subsequent equipment and training provided by the U.S.³⁷ Mexican goals were aimed at meeting multiple military requirements, including especially the insurgencies

in southern Mexico as well as the other tasks—for example, counterdrug, disaster relief, and humanitarian assistance.

The precise numbers of Mexican soldiers trained and equipment items provided over the 1996–2000 period are subject to varying interpretation and presentations. The result is a dizzying range of numbers in U.S. and Mexican sources that are often less than precise on support venues and training content.³⁸ A few examples, however, illustrate the nature and scale of the programs and—as will be addressed subsequently—the continuing sensitivities and bumps in the road, which can so easily surface in U.S.-Mexican military relations that seem to be going smoothly.

In 1996 the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (former School of the Americas) enrolled a reported 153 Mexican students, who constituted about 16.4 percent of the total number of military students from all countries. The courses taken by these Mexican personnel included the following:

- a. Instructor Training Course
- b. Military Intelligence Officer Course
- c. Commando, Resource Management, and Officer Training Management courses
- d. Medical Assistance, Civil-Military Operations, and the Psychological Operations courses
- e. Sapper, Special Training Management for Counterdrug Operations
- f. Battle Staff Operations courses
- g. Command and General Staff Officer Course.³⁹

By 1997 the number of Mexican students stood at 305, a number that comprised 33.5 percent of the total military student body. Courses included those like the instruction noted above.⁴⁰

In another training example, the Inter-American Air Forces Academy (IAAFA) at Lackland Air Force Base saw a similar jump in Mexican attendees. During the 1996–1998 period, the number of Mexican aviation students rose from 141 to 331 personnel. As in other training and military-educational venues, the jump in numbers reflected Mexico City's responses to a security environment shaped primarily by drug trafficking and simmering or periodically acute guerrilla activity. The leap was also the consequence of U.S. concerns, advice and offered support that were associated with the

growing threats. As one report put it, by “1998 Mexicans dominated the IAAFA training programs.”⁴¹



Mexican aviation training supported by the U.S. for the Army, Air Force, and Navy has increased from the 1990s to include some participation in multinational exercises. Shown here is a Mexican Navy BO-105 Bolkow helicopter firing two rockets at the ex-USS *Connolly* (DD 979) in an April 2009 “sinking exercise” in the Atlantic during UNITAS Gold. Photo by Petty Officer Seth Johnson.

As training for Mexican military personnel in the U.S. grew substantially, more than a few of the more prominent schools and facilities were involved. While the Army was most heavily represented, all services were involved, including the Mexican Navy’s Marine force. There were reportedly some 17 different military installations involved overall.⁴² According to many U.S. and Mexican reports, GAFE and other personnel for key special units were among those that received the most U.S. training in the United States and in Mexico. Between 1996 and 1998, as reported in *La Jornada*, more than 430 GAFE personnel were trained in air assault, drug interdiction operations, and human rights in the U.S.⁴³ Later *La Jornada* claimed that between 1996 and 1999, some 3,200 GAFE and evidently other Mexican personnel were scheduled to take 12-week courses under U.S. Special Forces trainers, with

some then serving as trainers themselves for “rapid response” (*reacción rápida*) units.⁴⁴

Training was also provided in Mexico by other nations, those mentioned being as diverse as Guatemala, Slovakia, and Spain among others. Reports of Mexicans training at the Guatemalan *Kaibil* Ranger-style counterinsurgency school evoked special protests from human rights groups and other activists, who claimed that the Kaibiles were responsible for Guatemalan atrocities.⁴⁵ Equipment sales and support complemented training provided to Mexico. U.S. military sales to Mexico have included a spectrum of equipment, ranging from night vision devices, body armor, and Humvees to coastal patrol craft, among many other items.

One of the most publicized U.S. military assistance efforts began in 1996 with the decision to send some 73 Vietnam era UH-1 helicopters to Mexico for counterdrug operations. The program was carried out under the auspices of the quickly cobbled together (and mercifully short-lived) Deputy Under-secretary of the Army for International Affairs (DUSA-IA) organization, led and staffed by inexperienced and often ineffective personnel, who developed and implemented an ill-conceived initiative that was plagued by problems from the onset. While public statements on both sides of the border lauded the effort, privately Mexican generals expressed disdain for the old equipment. The transfer also ran into early problems in the U.S. Congress over the potential use of the aircraft in counterinsurgency operations and other concerns, a problem that prompted irritated Mexican overtures to Russia for the purchase of MI-8 and MI-17 Russian helicopters.⁴⁶

In any event, political obstacles were overcome, but the eventual transfer of the refurbished aircraft in 1997 presented the Mexican military with continuing maintenance problems and limited helicopter usefulness. A continuing source of Mexican irritation during this period was allegations that the helicopters were being used in operations against insurgents in Guerrero and Chiapas. The truth of these allegations is far from clear, but they remained a source of Mexican military concern.⁴⁷ In early October 1999, despite U.S. efforts to resolve the problems, all but one of the helicopters (which had crashed) were returned by truck and unceremoniously dumped on U.S. territory.⁴⁸

The return of the helicopters served as a reminder that U.S.-Mexican military cooperation remained a delicate undertaking. It underscored that success would depend upon seriousness and attention far greater than that

of the hapless DUSA-IA. Since the mid-1990s, several incidents have added tension to the relationship. For example, the March 1996 announcement by Defense Secretary Perry—apparently a U.S. misunderstanding—that U.S.-Mexican ground and naval exercises were planned in the near future evoked quick denials from the Mexican Secretary of Foreign Relations and some heat from many other Mexican commentators. The announcement was made in the wake of Perry's October 1995 visit to Mexico, a follow-on meeting in San Antonio, Texas in December 1995, and the beginning stages of closer cooperation on training and modernization programs.

The Foreign Relations Secretariat made it clear that U.S.-Mexican military cooperation was confined to “the modernization of equipment, training courses, and the academic exchange of officers” as well as cooperation on “the fight against drug trafficking and assistance in facing natural disasters.”⁴⁹ This defined in sharp terms how Mexico perceived the limits of the U.S.-Mexican military relationship. Similarly, Mexico’s enduring memories of past U.S. violations of Mexican sovereignty are sharply drawn. The 1996 publication of a book by former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, *The Next War*, raised some Mexican ire for its scenario that envisioned a U.S. ground and amphibious invasion of Mexico in a future “2003,” following the postulated election of a narcogovernment in Mexico, mass border crossings by refugees, and acts of terror in major U.S. southwest cities. That this and the other scenarios in the book were presented as based on actual Pentagon war games further stirred the pot for long-suspicious Mexican readers.⁵⁰

The annual U.S. certification of states cooperating in the struggle against drug trafficking was a yearly trial for the Mexican government and from their perception, an insulting process and unjustified interference in internal affairs. It was not uncommon, however—given the recognized consequences for bilateral relations—that Mexico announced a new counterdrug initiative or other positive enforcement announcement just prior to the certification decision. This evoked a measure of cynicism in some U.S. quarters. Continuing revelations of high-level corruption during this period mustered in support of anticertification sentiments were enduring embarrassment for Mexico. In particular, the Mexican Government was particularly outraged at Operation Casablanca, a money-laundering operation aimed at Mexican banks that resulted in widely published, and evidently unproven, allegations of corruption against General Cervantes himself (the Secretary of National Defense (1994–2000), among others.⁵¹ So while some of these issues

were not military per se, they added frictions to U.S.-Mexican military engagement. These kinds of developments remained and remain constant threats to smooth U.S.-Mexican relationships, as stated in official Mexican Government documents and numerous other commentaries at the time and subsequently.⁵²

Overall, on the eve of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on U.S. targets, the Mexican military was continuing to modernize while engaging in counterdrug and periodic counterinsurgency missions. The changing nature of Mexican military training, deployment, and operations—and particularly the roles in which the Armed Forces are used—was evident not only in the interior of the country but also along the U.S.-Mexican border where a complex mix of military and law enforcement issues promised to make the 21st century an important time for decision-making on both sides of the border.⁵³

9/11 and Beyond: U.S. Northern Command and the Quickening Pace of U.S.-Mexican Military Interaction. The 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States had an early, substantial, and continuing impact on relations with Mexico. The U.S. had an immediate imperative to impose tightened border security and other measures. While Mexico City may not have had the same level of concern—and felt somewhat insulted by the identification of Mexico as a potential source of terrorism—the Mexican leadership recognized that a far more vigorous border security regimen was upcoming. None of the former security issues disappeared, of course, but attention was turned to the terrorist threat coming across a porous border.

Among new terrorism-associated efforts were the formation of new U.S.-Mexican border working groups aimed at identifying and mitigating terrorist dangers including threats to infrastructure, transportation, water, agriculture, energy, and other resources; the reorganization of U.S. Federal law enforcement, elements of the Intelligence Community and other security organizations; and efforts to prod other slow-moving U.S. Government agencies into a more focused and energetic posture of engagement with Mexican counterpart organizations. The 22-point “U.S.-Mexico Border Partnership Agreement” that advanced these issues in a formal way was signed by Mexican President Vicente Fox and U.S. President George W. Bush on January 2002 in Monterrey, Mexico, to be followed by many other initiatives.⁵⁴ However, the biggest military development of the post 9/11

period with implications for Mexico was the organization and October 2002 standup of a new regional combatant command (COCOM) designated the United States Northern Command (USNORTHCOM).⁵⁵

Northern Command's mission was to provide "command and control of DoD homeland defense efforts" and to "coordinate defense support of civil authorities." It was an important and well-conceived effort to consolidate disparate elements and to focus its assets. Its unique status of exercising dedicated operational military responsibility for the U.S. homeland was notable in itself. The new COCOM's area of responsibility, which would include air, land, and sea approaches and encompass the continental United States, Alaska, Canada, Mexico, and the surrounding water out to approximately 500 nautical miles, was central to the post-9/11 security environment.⁵⁶

The creation of USNORTHCOM received attention in the United States regarding its composition, command and control, activities, and constitutional or legal issues associated with the command's responsibilities inside the country. Ordinarily, changes in the Unified Command Plan—which sets out the responsibilities of regional and functional COCOMs and the areas of responsibility (AORs) for the former—elicits little popular interest or commentary. Foreign military and intelligence analysts of course follow such changes with close attention and a critical eye and sometimes express concern or dismay over the inclusion of their national territory—for example, Russian suspicion a decade ago at being newly included in the United States European Command (USEUCOM) AOR when it had not earlier been associated with a specific COCOM.

The establishment of USNORTHCOM, however, attracted immediate public and official attention in Mexico many months before its composition and mission became entirely clear. As the dimensions began to take shape as early as spring 2002 with the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, and other U.S. spokesmen adding more to the record, criticism became more specific. It was initially held at arm's length by the military, and commentary was often negative in the public media. It raised longstanding intervention sensitivities along with existing criticisms of earlier "militarization" on both sides of the border, drug and other criminal violence attributed to a U.S. drug habit, illegal immigration frictions, and the new face of terrorism.

The Sedena declared in the early months of 2002 that the new American command would alter nothing in terms of U.S.-Mexican military interaction.

The Sedena's deputy chief of Operations, Brigadier General Javier del Real Magallanes, declared that "They are creating the Northern Command to oversee the protection of their areas of interest in the northern hemisphere, but only from their perspective. This does not involve Canada at all, much less Mexico: in other words, Mexico has absolutely nothing to do with the Northern Command." Subsequent USNORTHCOM suggestions of joint air defense structures and other interaction elicited similar Sedena public denials or silence when asked for more specific responses.⁵⁷ Other nonmilitary government commentary followed in a similarly cautious and sometimes more negative vein, which continues sporadically to date.⁵⁸ Popular media commentary in Mexico was sometimes measured, more often than not suspicious, and not infrequently in the realm of wild assertion about U.S. "secret" plans.

The U.S.-Mexican military relationship has nevertheless slowly advanced in a variety of useful ways—moved by continuing U.S.-Mexican talks and visits at the most senior and lower levels, ongoing training and instruction venues, growing threats to stability inside Mexico and north of the border requiring assistance and cooperation, and confidence-building outreach programs. A few developments illustrate the advances. Even when the first Mexican concerns over USNORTHCOM were being voiced in 2002, Mexico participated in the long-established phased annual naval deployment exercise UNITAS 2002 for their first time. Seven countries participated in the Caribbean phase, and the Mexican frigate *Mariano Absalo* (a U.S. Knox-class ship purchased by the Mexican Navy) constituted a most important advance in Mexico's regional security engagement.⁵⁹

A new U.S.-Mexican initiative in the fall of 2003 was not military *per se*, but indicative of growing trust in U.S.-Mexican security affairs and cooperation against terrorism. The initiative, which according to Mexican media was designated *XBase*, concentrated on "groups and arms involved in terrorist attempts or bombings." The concept was based on a shared database that included information on bomb construction and terrorist group intelligence. At least two other countries were involved as well.⁶⁰ Following its establishment, USNORTHCOM sponsored numerous Mobile Training Team (MTT) activities with Mexico. The MTT topics included "countering illegal activities near and across our borders, increasing information sharing, and counterterrorism" among other topics. USNORTHCOM Personnel Exchange



Mexico began participating in the UNITAS exercise series in 2002. This April 2009 photo marked the 50th anniversary of the exercise series and featured participants from Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Germany, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay, and the United States. Photo by Petty Officer Seth Johnson.

Programs were characterized by U.S. and Mexican officers performing duties in both countries.⁶¹

In February 2004, Mexico also sent observers to the NORTHCOM exercise *Unified Defense* phase held at Fort Sam Houston, Texas under the auspices of U.S. Army North (formerly Fifth Army).⁶² In 2005 and for the first time, the USNORTHCOM commander was invited to attend the Mexican Independence Day celebration *Grito* (Shout) taking place on 16 September. The Secretary of the Navy invited him. Subsequent invitations for *Grito* were forthcoming as well.⁶³ Continuing USNORTHCOM outreach to Mexican legislative and media representatives added a new and worthwhile dimension to confidence-building activities and fostering a better civilian understanding of USNORTHCOM's missions.⁶⁴

USNORTHCOM supported various doctrinal and force structure initiatives as requested by Mexico. In the years immediately following 9/11, newly articulated concepts took place in the areas of military intelligence and counterintelligence as well, with the drafting of new field manuals and associated training that was in some cases provided by foreign trainers including the U.S. While such doctrinal materials are typically classified

at some level or otherwise restricted from public dissemination, they do occasionally surface in the Mexican media. A case in point in the realm of “special” units was the appearance of a new counterintelligence manual in 2006 that elaborated a far more offensive counterintelligence concept to include the establishment of “secret cells” trained to target and eliminate hostile intelligence activities.⁶⁵

As noted, in the development of Special Forces, the additional GAFES that began forming in the mid-1990s were company-size mobile light infantry units with more advanced and specialized training in desert, mountain, and jungle operations. Special operations training, as noted, was provided by experienced foreign armies including the Guatemalan *Kaibiles* special operations forces, employed throughout Guatemala’s long communist insurgency. In 2002 the GAFE units were reorganized as Special Forces battalions and brigades, though they are typically still referred to informally as GAFES. By 2004, total GAFE troop strength was estimated at about 5,500.

The mandated Special Forces Command (Corps) (*Cuerpo de Fuerzas Especiales*), created in 1997 and the Special Forces School (*Escuela de Fuerzas Especiales*) in 1998, continued to be the beneficiary of foreign training. GANFES intended for riverine and coastal operations were also created that same year and continued to be developed.⁶⁶ In addition, Naval and Marine (Naval Infantry) Special Forces were maintained as well as air and naval support elements. While these forces have individually and collectively been employed in counterinsurgency operations, they have been particularly active against drug trafficking organizations and their increasingly well-armed and trained paramilitaries—incorporating former military and police personnel and especially special operations elements.

An enduring and significant U.S.-Mexican military venue, initially conducted under the auspices of Fifth U.S. Army, had begun in 1987 when such venues were less common than two decades later. With the establishment of USNORTHCOM and the renaming and/or reorganizing of components, the Border Commanders’ Conference (BCC) fell under U.S. Army North (formerly Fifth U.S. Army). As before, the BCC has continued to offer “a forum for improving mutual understanding, communications, and cooperation between area headquarters on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border.” It furthers the “increase in shared information between the two armies and enhanced cooperation and interoperability along the border and

has begun to help both nations' effectiveness in the fight against the criminal drug cartels.”⁶⁷ The 2008 BCC was held in El Paso, Texas. As in past years, the U.S.-hosted venue included leadership from the three Mexican military regions and U.S. counterparts among other invited U.S. and Mexican defense participants who reviewed joint progress on border security issues, shared information, and addressed lessons learned.⁶⁸

An important development in U.S.-Mexican engagement, security relations, and security assistance took shape in 2007. While not a USNORTHCOM initiative *per se*, it was associated in various ways. In the fall of 2007, U.S. President George W. Bush and newly elected Mexican President Felipe Calderón agreed to, and jointly announced, an undertaking designated the Merida Initiative. It was intended to promote regional stability through stepped-up efforts against drug and arms trafficking, other forms of organized crime, and the accompanying violence that was continuing to undermine security. U.S. congressional funding for Mexican initiatives was forthcoming beginning in fiscal year 2008 and aimed specifically at supporting counterdrug, counterterrorism, and border security; public safety and law enforcement; institution building and judicial/law enforcement reforms; and associated program support. Limited funding was made available for Central American countries as well. The U.S. military has had a supporting but significant role in this effort, concerned principally with the provision of helicopter and fixed-wing transport and surveillance aircraft, communications and other equipment, and some associated logistic and training support.⁶⁹

Following up on the October 2007 Merida Initiative inauguration, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates visited Mexico several months later in April. This was the first such visit by a defense secretary since William Perry’s in 1995—6 years before 9/11.⁷⁰ During his “very cordial” and “very open” discussions with Mexican Secretary of Defense, General Guillermo Galvan; Secretary of Foreign Relations, Patricia Espinosa; and Government Secretary Juan Mourino, Secretary Gates emphasized the value of the Merida Initiative in the joint fight against transnational threats to include drug trafficking and other criminal organizations and gangs and associated issues. The U.S. Defense Secretary better defined the U.S. military role. He indicated that while the Merida Plan was managed by the U.S. State Department and Mexican interests were centered on reforming and improving law

enforcement and civilian security agencies, the Defense Department for their part would train and support the forces involved and seek to develop other venues like educational and informational exchanges. Although the State Department would manage the program, the Defense Department would train and support the forces involved.

In recognition of Mexican sensitivities that had been sometimes underestimated in the past, Secretary Gates acknowledged that the U.S.-Mexican military relationship was relatively new, progress would be cautious and carefully considered, and deference would be given to Mexican sovereignty. He indicated that U.S. support would be toward helping Mexico go after the cartels and other criminals without the U.S. overstepping its bounds and emphasized that no “U.S. combat troops or anybody like that” would be involved and that Mexico would identify its requirements. While seeming a common enough thing in such international exchanges, Secretary Gates wreath-laying at the 201 Fighter Squadron Memorial—commemorating the



In support of the Border Patrol, U.S. Navy Seabees from Naval Mobile Construction Battalion (NMCB) 133 and NMCB 14 in March 2009 constructed a 10-foot-high wall and concrete drainage ditch along the U.S.-Mexico border at Douglas, Arizona. Photo by Petty Officer-1 Matthew Tyson.

Mexican aviation unit that fought as a U.S. ally in World War II—certainly had a most salutary effect. As with General Sullivan’s visit more than a decade earlier, the ceremony constituted a recognition that the Mexican Armed Forces took most seriously.⁷¹

Overall, advances in U.S. Mexican military interaction by the end of 2008 had advanced in ways that would have been unrecognizable in the decade or so earlier. Mexico’s security environment continued to deteriorate, however, at least initially, even with newly promised aid, closer U.S.-Mexican ties, and other efforts. A deteriorating public safety and national security environment in the Mexican interior, along the Southwest border, and with spillover into parts of the United States at a substantial distance from the border sparked pessimistic predictions in the media about future prospects.

Near the end of 2008, an official U.S. military publication by the U.S. Joint Forces Command (USJFCOM) called into question the future stability of Mexico and the prospect that it may become a failed state. The publication, designated the *Joint Operational Environment (JOE)*, is updated yearly and intended to be a “historically informed, forward-looking effort to discern most accurately the challenges we will face at the operational level of war, and to determine their inherent implications.”⁷² The following JOE judgment had been a concern for years:

The growing assault by the drug cartels and their thugs on the Mexican government over the past several years reminds one that an unstable Mexico could represent a homeland security problem of immense proportions to the United States.⁷³

But seeing it articulated in even a speculative Defense Department estimate garnered popular media attention as well. More specifically, the JOE continued:

The Mexican possibility may seem less likely, but the government, its politicians, police, and judicial infrastructure are all under sustained assault and pressure by criminal gangs and drug cartels. How that internal conflict turns out over the next several years will have a major impact on the stability of the Mexican state. Any descent by Mexico into chaos would demand an American response based on the serious implications for homeland security alone.⁷⁴

At about the same time, retired U.S. Army General Barry McCaffrey—in his capacity as an advisor to a Mexican law enforcement leadership consortium—issued a late December 2008 report based on a several-day visit and meeting in Mexico with senior law enforcement specialists from Mexico and other countries. He described a worsening Mexican security situation characterized by:

- a. A fight “for survival against narcoterrorism”
- b. A looming “terrible tragedy” for Mexico with profound national security implications for the U.S.
- c. The prospect of violent narcocartels exercising “de facto control over broad regions of northern Mexico.”⁷⁵

At the same time, state and municipal Southwest border law enforcement—most typically county sheriffs and associations—as well as a number of border state governors and other state political representatives were becoming more vocal in their alarm. In March 2009, for example, the sheriff of Zapata County, Texas—and president of the Border Sheriff’s Coalition—joined with the National Sheriffs’ Association in requesting the Merida Initiative funding be nearly doubled. As elsewhere along the 2,000-mile border, these law enforcement representatives asserted that their existing resources could not cope with the threat burgeoning border violence and noted further that the new presidential administration of Barack H. Obama had not requested their input in defining requirements and solutions.⁷⁶ Texas Governor Rick Perry had also requested that the Federal authorities fund some 1,000 active duty or National Guard troops and/or Federal police agents for duty on the Texas border in support of existing law enforcement checkpoints and patrols attempting to control the huge narcodollar shipments as well as some weapons intended for cartels moving south into Mexico.⁷⁷

Broader assessments of mounting security problems, such as those noted above, were given more impact by the daily, graphic media reports of drug violence south of the border. Drug-related murders and abductions of Americans on both sides of the border—and the astonishing designation of Phoenix, Arizona as the second highest kidnapping center of the world behind Mexico City—added to the often dry statistical evidence. Deeply felt individual border violence like the murder of a young border patrolman in July 2009 by Mexican drug/alien smugglers underscored the potential

Two men scale the border fence along the Southwest border in March 2009, while just a few hundred yards away Navy Seabees work on the same 10-foot high wall and drainage ditch at Douglas, Arizona. Photo by Petty Officer-1 Matthew Tyson.



for more violence against U.S. border law enforcement. Increasingly, some voiced fears that border violence could escalate to the high level of casualties suffered by Mexican police country-wide, and military personnel as well, in performing their duties.⁷⁸

These continuing reminders of serious public safety and national security threats at a minimum added further urgency to programs that were in any case progressing. By early summer 2009, that year's supplemental budget request for Merida and other support programs had made Mexico the top recipient of U.S. aid in Latin America, displacing Colombia (the former top recipient).⁷⁹ Mexico figured prominently in the *National Drug Control Strategy, 2009 Annual Report* and the June 2009 *Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy*.⁸⁰ While these documents barely addressed the

U.S. military's role in supporting Mexican military and law enforcement, many of the programs described earlier contributed in multiple ways.

In March 2009, in a continued program of high level visits, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen met with Mexican Secretary of National Defense, General Guillermo Galvan and Secretary of the Navy, Admiral Mariano Francisco Saynez. He also addressed Mexican Naval War College students and, in what has become a tradition, laid a wreath at the memorial for the noted World War II 201st Fighter Squadron.⁸¹ Discussions focused on the drug cartel threat, the critical need for joint actions against a common threat, and the substantial support to be provided under the Merida Initiative. Admiral Mullen pointed to how closely the drug cartels and gangs resembled terrorist groups in terms of intelligence assessment requirements and emphasized the need for intelligence sharing and effective surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities. He also praised Mexican counterdrug efforts to date and underscored the necessity of Mexican military participation in light of endemic corruption in police and some other institutions. In contrast to the cool reception given by Mexican authorities to proposals for joint exercises a decade earlier, Admiral Mullen cited the values of continuing Naval and Coast Guard joint training. He also cited the expressed interest of General Galvan, the Mexican Army and Air Force commander, in continued and increased training.⁸²

Following Admiral Mullen's trip, the Mexican Senate approved the



While visiting the Mexico City National Cemetery in Mexico City, Mexico in March 2009, Mexican Cemetery Superintendent Hector de Jesus tells Admiral Mike Mullen about the 750 unknown U.S. interred service members from the Mexican-American War and other American servicemen, family members, and diplomatic personnel interred there. Photo by MSgt Adam M. Stump.

participation of substantial Mexican Navy components in the exercise series UNITAS 50-90 from 19 April to 7 May 2009. The ships involved in what was termed an exercise with a counterdrug and counterorganized crime theme included the Allende Class Frigate, *Arm Mina* (F-214) with *Bolkow* (BO-105) helicopter; the Oaxaca Class *Arm Oaxaca* (PO-161) with *Panther* (AS 565 MB) helicopter; and of some note given their small-unit action/raiding capability, a 45-man Marine (*Infantería de Marina*) contingent.⁸³ Both Mexican and U.S. media sources indicated that USNORTHCOM would provide operational level assistance to Mexico during the exercise, with USSOUTHCOM also supporting Mexico in a training role. In a military-educational example illustrating U.S.-Mexican Naval cooperation, a U.S. Navy admiral testifying before a House of Representatives subcommittee in June 2009 credited the faculty of the U.S. Center for Naval Warfare Studies with the attainment of “unprecedented levels of interaction and interoperability.”⁸⁴

In April 2009, President Obama visited Mexican President Felipe Calderon in Mexico. It was principally seen as an early get-acquainted trip and one intended to facilitate U.S.-Mexican relations on a range of topics, especially the struggle against the multifaceted drug threat with the associated



Marking Mexico's continued participation in multinational exercises a Mexican boarding party conducts an inspection drill of a German Navy combat support ship during 2009 UNITAS Gold the Atlantic. Participants included in addition to Mexico and Germany, the United States and eight other countries. Photo by Petty Officer Seth Johnson.

violence and arms trafficking dimensions.⁸⁵ Obama made a return visit to Mexico from 9–10 August at Guadalajara. The visit included not only the U.S. President and President Calderon but also Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper.⁸⁶ While concentrating on issues like travel regulations, the potential flu pandemic, energy, and environmental issues, the serious and lethal state of Mexican public safety, national security, and enduring Southwest border violence provided a backdrop to other forms of interaction and initiatives intended to facilitate progress. Nearly a decade into the 21st century, with the single largest vector of border violence indisputably narcotrafficking, there must be a sense of real urgency that specialists have tried to convey with varying levels of success. What underscores this for doubters is Mexican President Calderon's estimate that 9,000 narcolinked murders occurred from 2006 to April 2009. Other estimates suggest that the number will exceed 11,000 by 2010.⁸⁷

Also in April 2009, Admiral Michael Mullen took an El Paso area border tour. The tour was evidently in response to increasing calls from Southwest border governors to reinforce law enforcement on the border with uniformed military personnel. The Army's Joint Task Force North—a USNORTHCOM component at Fort Bliss in the El Paso area—and the U.S. Border Patrol officials in the area briefed Admiral Mullen. El Paso—as even East Coast and Midwestern Americans generally know, thanks to its periodic visibility in the news—lies on the northern side of the Rio Grande immediately across from the Mexican city of Juárez. Thousands of Mexican military personnel remain deployed and engaged there in 2009 in an effort to control burgeoning narcoviolence. There are a few older El Paso citizens still residing in the city who remember higher levels of Juárez violence and heavy fighting during the Mexican Revolution. On a number of occasions over several years, curious civilian spectators to the fighting on their roofs, on the banks of the Rio Grande, or simply sitting in homes or offices were killed or wounded by stray bullets from the battles.

That kind of hot environment has not been seen today in El Paso or other U.S. border cities. But in recent years, drug violence directed against illegal and legal U.S. residents from Mexico involved in trafficking have boosted the crime rates of some border and interior cities. These encompass the unholy trinity of “killings, kidnappings, and home invasions” in a number of border cities, including the prior mentioned elevation of Phoenix, Arizona

into the top kidnapping city in the United States.⁸⁸ For cities like Phoenix, in a familiar parallel to Mexican law enforcement, police departments have become more militarized and received training that enable them to engage criminals with automatic weapons, grenade launchers, body armor, and improved skill levels.

One model of growing cross-border violence was illustrated by the August 2009 arraignment of members of the Mexican drug, kidnapping, and murder group *Los Palillos* (the Toothpicks) in San Diego, California. The arraignment highlighted what had been a 4-year period of brutal drug-related murders, abductions and torture, including the killing of a U.S. police officer.⁸⁹ So too did the May 2009 daylight assassination of a Juárez drug cartel mid-level leader, Jose Daniel Gonzalez Galena. The assassination was accomplished quickly and in front of the target's El Paso home in an upscale residential neighborhood. The eight close-range shots were heard by neighbors including the city police chief who lived nearby.⁹⁰ This assassination was notable when the alleged assassins were eventually identified and arrested. The Juárez cartel traffickers in Mexico, who ordered the murder, had effectively recruited a small team of El Paso residents to conduct surveillance and support. The actual shooter, as alleged with his arrest, was a U.S. Army soldier stationed at nearby Fort Bliss, raising an immediate concern about cartel military recruitment.⁹¹

Far more than border cities are threatened, however, and Atlanta is a case in point. Drug violence in that city has so far involved limited attacks among drug gang members, as they have in some of the other 195 or more U.S. cities having a Mexican drug trafficking cartel presence.⁹² The consequence of this is to establish an infrastructure that will likely serve as a vector for future drug violence extending beyond border areas. It is border security, however, and the reduction of narcoviolence inside Mexico that will remain key considerations in U.S. military support and cooperation initiatives and in any unilateral military actions the U.S. may choose to take on behalf of border security.

Because of such incidents, some border governors continue to see unacceptable levels of drug trafficking, human trafficking, and occasional cross-border narcoviolence, kidnappings, and assassinations emanating from Mexico as precursors of far worse to come. The Department of Homeland Security *border czar* and other officials, however, have minimized the

existing spillover and the worries of some. Admiral Mullen, on his first border tour, noted no plans exist “that I am aware of or would talk about” to significantly reinforce the border with military personnel and support would continue as in the past.⁹³ Pressures for a different decision will certainly continue to increase if progress is not made south of the Rio Grande.

Nevertheless, it is the spectrum of security-associated initiatives that occupies the central place in U.S.-Mexican relations at all levels, with more changes in this regard on the horizon. Beginning in 2009, it appears that a continuing focus on Mexican special operations units—the enhancement of those that have existed for some time and the creation of new, more effective components—reflected a priority that perhaps exceeds what existed in the past.⁹⁴ As earlier, it is likely that these forces will be the recipients of substantial U.S. training and materiel support. As a consequence—and given the importance of these forces—it is instructive to briefly set out the status of Mexican special operations forces.

In mid-2009, Mexico’s best known and further expanded special operations forces are found in both the Sedena and the Semar, with other covert groups existing that occasionally become visible as well.⁹⁵ The aforementioned GAFES belong to the Army in what is collectively referred to as the Army Special Operations Corps (*Cuerpo de Fuerzas Especiales del Ejercito*). Many sources report that there are additional GAFE elements each termed an Airborne Special Forces Group (GAFE) of the High Command—*Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales (GAFE) del Alto Mando*. The Naval secretariat also has an effective special operations force (which will be addressed later in this monograph). In addition, the Special Forces Military School formed in the mid-1990s, was redesignated the Special Forces Training Center. There are also specialized training facilities to include, for example, the Training Center for Jungle and Amphibious Operations (*Centro de Adiestramiento de Operaciones en Selva y Anfibias*) in the Mexican state of Quintana Roo.⁹⁶

The aforementioned Army GAFES have in recent years comprised some nine battalions organized into three brigades and as some sources report, two additional GAFE groups assigned to the Paratroop Rifle Brigade (*Brigada de Fusileros Paracaidistas*—BFP) and to the 1st Army Corps. The GAFES of the High Command are little discussed publically, but their composition is said to be drawn from personnel assigned to Army GAFES. They are based in the Mexico City area and are immediately subordinate to the Secretary

of National Defense for employment in especially important and sensitive missions. They supposedly played a role in the 2003 capture of major drug trafficker Osiel Cárdenas Guillén.

It appears clear that selected elements within the GAFES are receiving a dimension of intelligence-gathering and analytical training barely mentioned in the past. Unspecified “special military intelligence groups” are conducting the training, and the newly emphasized and more sophisticated and complex purpose is “deciphering the structure of Mexican criminal organizations; locating safe houses; discovering their routes of operation and national smuggling, as well as their fire power, their international scope, and the connections they have with criminal groups from other countries.”⁹⁷

This approach and training is suggestive of the intelligence special operations group, described as elite, and purportedly set up and trained at least in part by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency and possibly special operations personnel more than a decade earlier. It was equipped with sophisticated surveillance and tracking equipment. Descriptions suggested missions and approaches attributed to an analogous U.S. unit publically designated the “Intelligence Support Activity” as well as the “British Special Reconnaissance Regiment” and its precursors. Dubbed the “Center for Antidrug Intelligence of the National Defense Headquarters”—*Centro de Inteligencia Antinarcóticos del Estado Mayor de la Defensa Nacional* (CIAN)—this secretive organization, designed to analyze and target drug cartels, was said by some to only be nominally a part of the Sedena.⁹⁸

The Mexican Navy has two Special Forces Groups (*Grupos de Fuerzas Especiales*), which originated from the Mexican Marine paratrooper components. Formed in 2001 and developed further thereafter, one group assigned to the Pacific (*Fuerzas Especiales del Golfo*—FESGO) and the other to the Gulf of Mexico (*Fuerzas Especiales del Pacífico*—FESPA). These forces are intended to operate independently, specialize in infiltration by all means; and operate in maritime, riverine, and other environments to include urban operations. They are intensively trained in hostage rescue and personnel recovery, as well as in all of the sniper, explosive, and other skills associated with most special operations forces.⁹⁹ In addition to the Navy Special Forces per se, in 2001 the Navy also formed Amphibious Reaction Forces (*Fuerzas Reacción Anfibia*) within the Marines forces. It comprises two amphibious battalions, a battalion of commandos, one of artillery, amphibious boats and

vehicles, and other support or reinforcing components. They are intended to be a ready force for use against drug traffickers, terrorists, other strong criminal groupings, and insurgents and to aid in disaster relief if needed.¹⁰⁰



Mexican Marines (Fraimgo Battango-2, Amphibious Command Battalion) participated in the 2009 Partnership of the Americas multinational exercise as part of Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force 24 together with Marine components from the U.S., Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Uruguay and soldiers from Canada. Shown here, Mexican Marines draw their equipment for the day's training. Photo by Chief Warrant Officer-2 Keith A. Stevenson.

By late 2001, Naval Special Forces were receiving counterinsurgency and counterterrorist training, with a Naval Special Operations School established in April 2001 that accommodated “foreign” military trainers. A new infrastructure protection role assigned to the Navy was met by the creation of the “Strategic Installations Security Unit (ASIE) comprised of ground units, presumably Marines.¹⁰¹ Over the next several years Naval special operations forces received new small arms and other equipment, and key cadre underwent counterterrorist and other training in Mexico, the United States, and no doubt elsewhere as well.¹⁰² The employment of Navy Special Forces, Amphibious Reaction Forces, and units from the Sedena in

operations against drug traffickers in Sinaloa in 2008 suggested that joint operations—not a Mexican tradition—may be advancing.

While not classified as *special operations* forces per se, other Mexican units to include airborne and Marine units provide Mexico with an array of capabilities that will clearly be the object of U.S. support as well as that from other countries.



Mexican Marines fire M-249 squad automatic weapon machine guns while training at Camp Blanding, Florida in April 2009. Training took place during the multinational and multiservice exercise Partnership of the Americas 2009. Photo by Lance Corporal Christopher J. Gallagher.

Problems posed by the increasing firepower of the Mexican drug cartels, and their well-armed and capable paramilitaries incorporating military and police deserters, have increased the instances of special training being developed for units like the Paratrooper Rifle Brigade. As widely reported for several years, deserters or discharged servicemen primarily from the Army GAFE and GANFE units, and deserters from the Paratroop Brigade and other units, have bolstered cartel paramilitary elements, with the so-called Zeta paramilitaries and their various analogs and spinoffs sometimes capable of defeating or stalemating regular Mexican Army units. Notably mentioned as the most dangerous because of the special operations cadres were *Los Zetas* in Tamaulipas, *La Familia* in Michoacán, *Los Pelones* in Sinaloa, and *Los Halcones* in Chihuahua. Beginning in 2008, paratroop elements from the Paratrooper Brigade began receiving special operations training at the Special Forces Training Center and in other specialized sites. The troops were more intensively prepared in operations against heavily armed small groups (10 men or less) whose mobility required rapid insertion, including at night. Paratroop elements so prepared are already being employed.¹⁰³

4. Conclusions

United States military engagement efforts directed at Mexico have improved demonstrably thanks to more carefully considered approaches to the Mexican military leadership. A greater recognition of the Mexican military's historical and current institutional sensitivities and national government internal restraints have led to approaches that are phased, measured, and in more accord with Mexico's preferred "go-slow" stipulations than many in the past. The good fortune of having senior U.S. military leadership at the national, combatant command, service, and various staff levels—who by dint of personality and experience established working relationships—in itself advanced Mexican military trust and confidence in the developing relationship. Unlike the seeming indifference of the 1996 Deputy Under Secretary of the Army-International Affairs (DUSA-IA) delivery of old helicopters, U.S. military assistance programs for materiel, as well as continuing high quality training, and military-educational opportunities created what promise to be enduring military-to-military bonds. The decision by the President George W. Bush administration to embark on the ambitious—and in potential critically important—Merida Initiative provided a national-level imprimatur for U.S. backing in a time of profound national security threat.

Much of U.S. military and security assistance has been targeted at the violence and trafficking of some seven major drug trafficking organizations as well as smaller operations. The principal challenge to U.S.-supported Mexican military and law enforcement security forces has been spearheaded by well-equipped narcoparamilitaries, often heavily laced with former Mexican special operations forces and other military personnel, former police officers and officials, and an enduring supply of experienced street thugs. As notable as paramilitary capabilities may appear, much of that effectiveness is owed to the "force multiplier" of endemic corruption.

Ubiquitous bribery and coercion of major and minor officials in security and other institutions by drug trafficking organizations opens police road blocks; unlocks prison doors; renders police and security forces blind, deaf, and speechless; reveals military and police plans for pending actions; and purchases not-guilty judgments or dismissals in the Mexican judicial system. It buys lists of informants and facilitates the dissemination of disinformation. Applied brutality and reward also gains a measure of silence

and cooperation from citizens. Drug paramilitary employment of informants and the use of squads of street-level observers generate continued information of value. The belief by some Mexican officials that Mexican military intelligence has been heavily penetrated probably has basis in fact, given the breadth and depth of cartel corruption successes.¹⁰⁴ Collectively, this constitutes a penetration of Mexican society that presents a daunting challenge—a complex puzzle of disentangling criminal enterprise that seems to have networks everywhere from the fabric of Mexican life.

While the infrastructure and practice of paramilitary violence is established in Mexico in seemingly unprecedented ways, the concern north of the border is its potential transportability. Many law enforcement personnel have compared 1980s Miami—with its running drug firefights, revenge raids, and bloody assassinations by Colombian cocaine traffickers—to Mexican drug violence. There are enough precursors north of the Rio Grande now to make the potential for something analogous more than empty speculation. Incidents of cross-border violence, a Mexican narcotrafficking presence in nearly 200 U.S. cities raising local crime rates, limited but increasing corruption among U.S. border law enforcement, and the successful recruitment of U.S. residents to commit capital murder suggest cross-border criminality could expand apace without stronger countermeasures. In that environment, outbreaks of narcoviolence analogous to 1980s Miami seem more than idle speculation.

If the Mexican Government under President Calderon maintains its commitment to the current approaches now underway, the U.S.-Mexican security relationship will remain an important focus of U.S. strategic planning, unilateral law enforcement-military actions by the U.S. and Mexico on their respective territories, and increasing cross-border law enforcement and military cooperation. There are, however, enduring calls in parts of the Mexican political establishment for an end to the direct military and police operations that underpin current counterdrug strategies.¹⁰⁵ To date, however, no viable alternatives have been offered. The *failed state* paradigms suggested by a number of specialists would be a disaster for Mexico, the U.S., and the region.

For the present, the potential for success rests heavily on U.S.-Mexican security relationships that have been developed in recent years. In particular, trained Mexican special operations units, as well as a number of other well-trained Mexican forces used in special operations roles, are executing

many of the direct armed engagement missions against narcoparamilitaries. Trained in part by U.S. SOF—as have some hard-pressed police personnel whose casualties continue to rise as they struggle with reform—they will be instrumental in effecting any positive change in Mexico’s still deteriorating security environment. They will also be important in defining what future U.S. military domestic requirements will be generated north of the U.S.-Mexican border as a consequence of cross-over criminal violence, an influx of refugees, and other consequences of what could be exhausting, failing institutions to the south. ↑

Endnotes

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3. A few notes on sources employed may be worthwhile for some readers. The judgments made in this monograph are the beneficiary of diverse resources that collectively address the range of issues, facts, and incidents associated with Mexican and U.S. military engagement. The author has drawn on Mexican military and security information in Mexican media and official Mexican Government sources (many linked from www.presidencia.gob.mx/) that has expanded many fold over the last decade. Additionally—and of particular importance—the Director of National Intelligence's Open Source program and the access it provides to the following: a) extensive searchable databases of raw and evaluated information, b) foreign- and English-language media sources, c) unclassified but authoritative assessments by Government and academic specialists, and d) open source analytical tools were especially valuable in this regard. Similarly, the extensive translated and foreign language materials and supplementary media links provided by the Intelligence Community's Open Source Center (OSC) allowed the author to consider information from a broad spectrum of viewpoints and to compare perspectives. Among the valuable insights provided by OSC specialists, for example, is their continuing evaluation of Mexican (and other foreign) media orientation and agendas so as to provide better context for evaluating the information presented. While only a small fraction of materials considered by the author on any issue can be included in the source notes of the monograph due to space considerations, readers who wish to address specific issues and obtain further information can contact the author through JSOU. In addition, uniformed military and DoD civilians, Intelligence Community personnel, Federal law enforcement personnel, and certain contractors among other categories may be eligible to access the Open Source programs noted above. More can be learned by going to <http://ra.intelink.gov/>, <https://www.opensource.gov/>, or by contacting their commands or offices for information on access requirements.
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